Department of Archaeology

University of Reading

Silchester Insula IX

The 'Town Life' Project 2009–2010

Michael Fulford, Amanda Clarke & Frances Taylor

Scanned by CamScanner

Our 13th and 14th seasons of excavation in Insula IX have seen the completion of excavation of the archaeology of the late 1st and early 2nd century AD (Period 2). While much work remains to be completed on contexts dating between the AD 40s and 80s (Period 1), we have also begun to reveal more archaeology of the late Iron Age oppidum, between the later 1st century BC and the time of the Roman conquest of southern Britain, beginning in AD 43 (Period 0).

In part this reflects the result of an approach to concentrate on the archaeology of selected, but limited areas within the trench in order to gain a better understanding of the sequence of occupation. We have also undertaken a preliminary study of the finds, especially of the pottery, from a range of deposits in order to assure ourselves of our chronology and the sequence of development of this complex site. The pottery is of critical importance to the establishment of our chronology and our ability to distinguish between pre- and post-(Roman) conquest occupation.

Recent discoveries

Evidence for an Iron Age compound

In 2009 we reported the discovery of two streets or lanes on a north-west/south-east and a north-east/south-west orientation (1), a layout which anticipated the orientation of the 'House 1' sequence. In 2010 we confirmed that these were preceded by the setting out of boundaries and palisades and excavated three sections of what appears to be a significant boundary feature, a straight, v-profiled ditch (2) which runs alongside the north-west/south-east trending 'street'.

Origins of the Roman grid

Excavation in the north-east quadrant of the trench at the intersection of the two Roman streets has revealed that north-south street is earlier than its east-west counterpart, and may have been in place as early as AD 44. We have also started to uncover evidence for structures of a similar date and at a right angle to this street (3) in the south-east quadrant of the trench below Period 2 Early Roman Timber Buildings 5 and 8. These structures indicate a phase of Roman layout between the original Iron Age arrangement and its re-assertion in Period 2.

Roman military occupation

In 2009 the discovery of a Roman-style latrine pit with the remains of a Claudian mortarium at the base (4), together with the discovery of several finds of early Roman military equipment across the excavation over the years, raised the question of whether there was a Claudian military occupation of Calleva. Early Roman involvement in the town is further indicated by the early date of the north-south street and the structures which relate to it.

The southern half of the trench during excavation in 2010 (below).

Scanned by CamScanner

Boudica and the burning of Calleva

In order to account for the destruction which ends the Period 1 occupation we have previously suggested that Calleva was burnt down during the Boudican revolt in AD 60-61. A recent study of the pottery has reinforced this initial interpretation: none of the pottery from the relevant deposits so far assessed is later in date than the reign of Nero (AD 54-68). The archaeological evidence available to us cannot give us such precision in terms of date as to allow us to narrow down to one year rather than another, but a destruction around the time of the Boudican uprising would account for the extensive nature of the destruction which affected not only Insula IX but also the central area of the town beneath the 2nd century forum basilica.

Timeline

		25 BC
Late Iron Age	Period 0	
		AD 40/50
	Period 1	
Early Roman		AD 70/80
	Period 2	
		AD 125/150
	Period 3	
Mid Roman		AD 200
	Period 4	
		AD 250/300
Late Roman		
		AD 500/700

Minerva Intaglio

The tiny intaglio above was found in a Period 1 pit and is made from the semi-precious gemstone carnelian, which has been cut into a flattened oval with a slightly bevelled underside, and measures 13mm in length by 3mm in thickness. The image cut into the flat upper surface is of the Roman goddess Minerva who faces left, holding a spear and a shield. Behind her is a serpent. The images are very neatly and precisely cut, suggestive of a mid 1st century date.

Carnelian was used widely during Roman times to make engraved gems such as this. It would have sat in a signet or seal ring which would have been used for imprinting a wax seal on correspondence or other important documents.

Despite her warlike appearance, Minerva was chiefly a goddess of the domestic arts and of healing. In Britain she was often equated with local sky and healing deities, such as Sulis Minerva at the Sacred Spring at Bath. The snake shown behind her is also linked to healing - for example, a snake twines up the staff of the healer-god Aesculapius - but it may also refer to the Gorgon Medusa, whose head is usually shown at the centre of Minerva's breastplate.

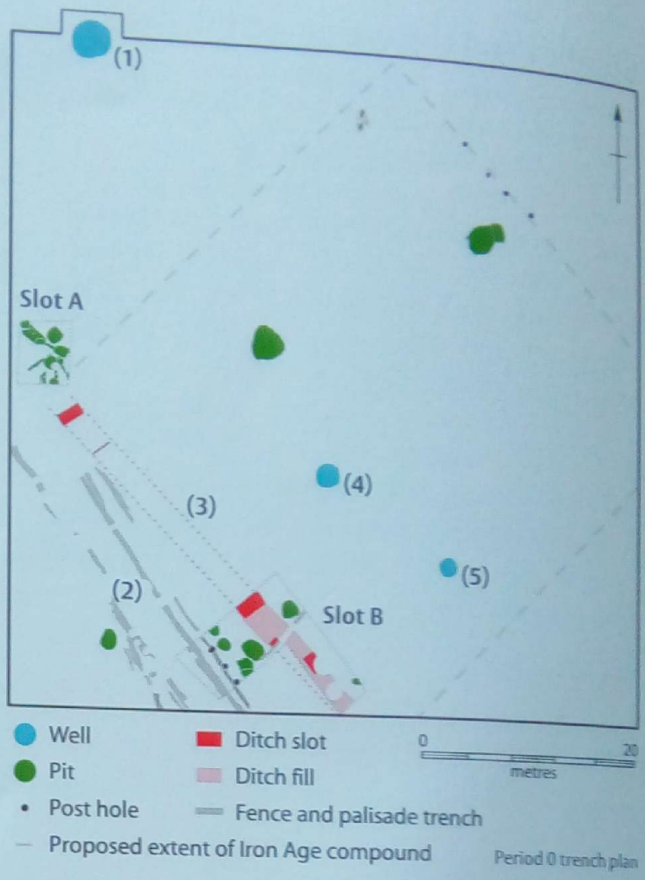
Trench plans (left-right): Periods 0, 1 & 2

Scanned by CamScanner

Period 0: The late Iron Age

What did Calleva Atrebatum look like in the late Iron Age? Excavations during 2009 and 2010 have begun to reveal the pre-Roman layout of the town, suggesting a grid of rectangular compounds aligned north-west/south-east/north-east/south-west and bounded by ditches, fences and palisades.

Our trench contains the larger part of one of these compounds with plentiful evidence of late Iron Age occupation, more of which will emerge in 2011 and subsequent seasons. The Iron Age town plan is adhered to even after the Roman arrival in AD 44, and is consolidated by the creation of the gravelled surfaces of the north-west/south-east aligned lane of Period 1.



Period 0 trench plan

Slot A

Slot A was excavated in 2010 with the aim of investigating the junction between the two Period 1 'lanes' in the western half of the trench. It revealed an area of intense activity, marked by many intercutting pits and gullies. Most were shallow and contained few finds other than pottery.

However, one of the larger pits contained a fill extremely rich in charcoal within which were found several pieces of slag and at least one piece of furnace lining. Samples taken from its primary fill revealed several more pieces of slag, an iron tool, a copper alloy globule and numerous pieces of hammer scale. These finds make this fill quite remarkable and provide evidence for the potential industrial nature of this area.

Dating of pre-conquest and early Roman contexts

A key problem for us in determining whether or not a group of pottery dates to before or around the time of the Roman conquest is the date of the start of the manufacture of wheel-thrown pottery produced in the Alice Holt/Farnham region. In reviewing the evidence both from Silchester and from other excavations in Berkshire, Hampshire and Surrey, Dr. Jane Timby has concluded that the industry was established by the Tiberio-Claudian period, c. AD 25-50. The absence of vessel forms from the early Alice Holt repertoire which are usually associated with early Roman military production, such as mortaria, flagons and open lamps, is a further indication of a pre-Roman origin. In 2009 we reported on the excavation of a late Iron Age well (1) in the north-west corner of the excavation and a Tiberio-Claudian date for the primary fills has now been confirmed by Dr. Timby.

2010 Excavation Strategy

During the 2010 season we made the decision to 'target' specific areas of the site by laying out a number of slot trenches and removing all deposits within them rapidly to natural undisturbed geology.

Scanned by CamScanner

The reason for this was two-fold: firstly to get a 'key-hole' view of the archaeology still to come in order to help us plan strategy over the next few seasons and secondly to make speedier progress with those areas of the site which still contain large spreads of undifferentiated gravelly soil. This strategy was an unmitigated success and has shown us that the Iron Age archaeology of Calleva Atrebatum consists of large numbers of features cutting into the underlying natural deposits.

The Late Iron Age compound

Through our 2010 excavation strategy the complex development of the boundaries of a late Iron Age compound is now beginning to be revealed. In particular, the excavation of an area in the south-west quadrant of the trench has produced evidence of successive fence and palisade trenches (2) as well as, to their east, a major v-profiled ditch (3), all of which run north-west/south-east, and some of which are sealed by the surfaces of the later Period 1 street or lane. While the primary fills of the substantial ditch produce little material, the secondary accumulations were comparatively rich in pottery. These fence and palisade trenches may well mark out small paths or thoroughfares, a precursor to the later gravelling of the streets. We suggest that similar fence and palisade trenches will also be revealed beneath the street gravelling running south-west to north-east, and will make up the northern side of an Iron Age compound.

Internal arrangements

So what of the Iron Age occupation inside the main compound? Our limited-area excavations to natural reveal complex pitting and, among one group of pits in the north-west, an assemblage of macro- and micro-iron slags indicate iron smithing. Two wells with fills dating to c. AD 25-50 have been identified, one almost in the centre of the trench (4), the other in the south-east (5), both revealed by the subsidence of overlying stratigraphy. Pottery, including briquetage, dominates the fills of these pits and includes abundant imports of Gallo-Belgic wares, produced in northern France, as well as some Mediterranean amphoras and sigillata (samian) from southern France and Italy.

Three finds from Iron Age well (5)

Find A is a late Iron Age coarseware cooking pot, which shows extensive burning on the outer surfaces.

Find B is a broken fragment of a clay Iron Age coin mould. These were used in the first stage of coin making to produce a blank which would then have been struck between two engraved pieces of metal known as 'dies'.

Find C is a complete bone awl made from a sheep or goat tibia. It has been carved to a very fine tapered point at one end and a small hole has been drilled through the remains of the bone joint at the other. It has a very highly polished surface which can probably be attributed to use wear.

Slot B

Slot B was excavated in 2010 in order to quickly remove the undifferentiated gravels and silts in the central southern area of the trench. It revealed a large number of features cut into the natural geology, many of which related to the fence and palisade boundary located to the south-west. A large linear ditch was revealed in plan and a number of slots were excavated through it to reveal its consistent 'v' shaped profile. A number of pits were also excavated, most significant was a large storage pit with under-cut sides.

Scanned by CamScanner

Period 1: The Claudian Military?

It has long been assumed that the Roman town of Silchester developed out of an Iron Age settlement, with no military precursor. However, our excavations in Insula IX are beginning to question this assumption. Evidence from the forum-basilica excavations of the 1980s, along with the discovery in 2010 that the main north-south street through the town was constructed at the time of the arrival of the Romans, and the excavation of a substantial 'military' cess-pit in Insula IX, have led us to postulate some form of Claudian military occupation.

The excavation trench in 2009 looking east showing the location of the possible military latrine pit (top). The pit after excavation (below).

Possible military latrine pit

In 2009 we excavated a large, vertical-sided, sub-rectangular pit close to the northern limit of the excavation. Its primary fills contained few finds, but notable among them was an almost complete Claudian mortarium. Both in plan and profile, as well as in the paucity of finds from its fills, this pit stands apart from other pits of pre-Flavian (pre-AD 70s) date from within the trench. We have tentatively interpreted the pit as a military latrine pit, noting that the Victorian excavators found a pit with the substantial remains of 1st century AD Roman armour in the adjacent Insula XXIII, some 125 metres to the north.

Origins of the north-south street

In 2010, in concluding excavations at the intersection of the north-south and the east-west street, it became clear that the north-south street is earlier than its east-west counterpart. Whereas the latter lies above a horizon of burnt daub and charcoal containing Claudio-Neronian pottery, the north-south street appears to lie directly on the natural gravel. Until we have excavated beneath it, we cannot be certain of a terminus post quem for its construction, but it is likely to be Tiberio-Claudian, i.e. c. AD 25-50. Whether that date can be refined will very much depend on coin evidence.

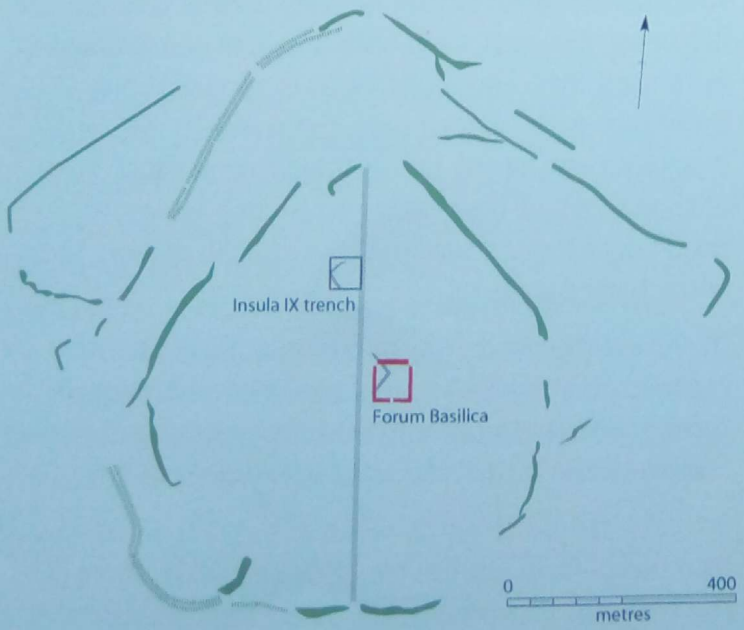
Forum-basilica excavations

Excavation beneath the 2nd century forum basilica in the 1980s revealed the remains of a substantial timber building consisting of at least three separate ranges and oriented north-south/east-west. Although material from beneath the building could not be more closely dated than Tiberio-Claudian, its construction was assigned to the Claudian period, c. AD 44-49. An early interpretation of this building was that it served as a military principia; later it was viewed as an early forum. Now the building, with its orientation distinctively at odds with that of the late Iron Age oppidum, can be seen as part of a larger arrangement within the town oriented on the cardinal points, north-south, east-west. The north-south street presumably extended across the whole town, but where was its east-west counterpart which would have carried the traffic from London to the west? Did it follow the course of what eventually became the east-west thoroughfare through the town, or was the

Scanned by CamScanner

organisation more akin to that of a military fort or fortress with the principia essentially diverting traffic around it? George Boon remarked on the similarity between the core grid of streets at Silchester and the layout of a military fortress, but this hypothesis remains to be tested by excavation. However, what is clear from the 2010 season is that if certain streets were in place in the 40s, others, including our east-west street, were not laid down until the later Flavian period, or later, coinciding with our Period 2 in Insula IX and the construction of the first forum basilica in timber, both dating from the 80s.

It is early days to speculate on the size of the military occupation and the nature of the garrison, and how it was disposed within the oppidum. However, if we postulate that the building beneath the basilica was more or less central to the fort or fortress and that our latrine pit is towards a northern limit, then the extent of the occupation north-south is some 380 metres. However, it is possible to imagine a looser arrangement extending out to the limits imposed by the defences of the Inner Earthwork and spreading across the 35 ha or so of the defended area. In this scenario might the military have lived side-by-side with the civilian occupants of the town, or was the town abandoned in the face of the Roman advance?



Plan showing the Iron Age earthworks of Calleva, the north-south street, Iron Age lanes aligned north-west/south-east and north-east/south-west found in Insula IX and under the forum basilica and the location of the possible Claudian military structure under the basilica.

Military finds

We have found several objects during our excavations which could support a Roman military presence at Silchester (above). Some are definitely from armour, others are horse trappings that may be either from cavalry or civilian harness. A baldric clasp (E) would have been used to secure a sword belt that was worn over one shoulder and passed diagonally across the chest. Two strap-plates (F and G) were probably used on military aprons. They had inlaid designs in black niello and the rest of the surface would have been tinned to provide a striking contrast. Two decorated studs also probably came from armour. One (D) shows the head of an emperor facing a palm branch, while on another (C) a winged Victory is depicted carrying a garland.

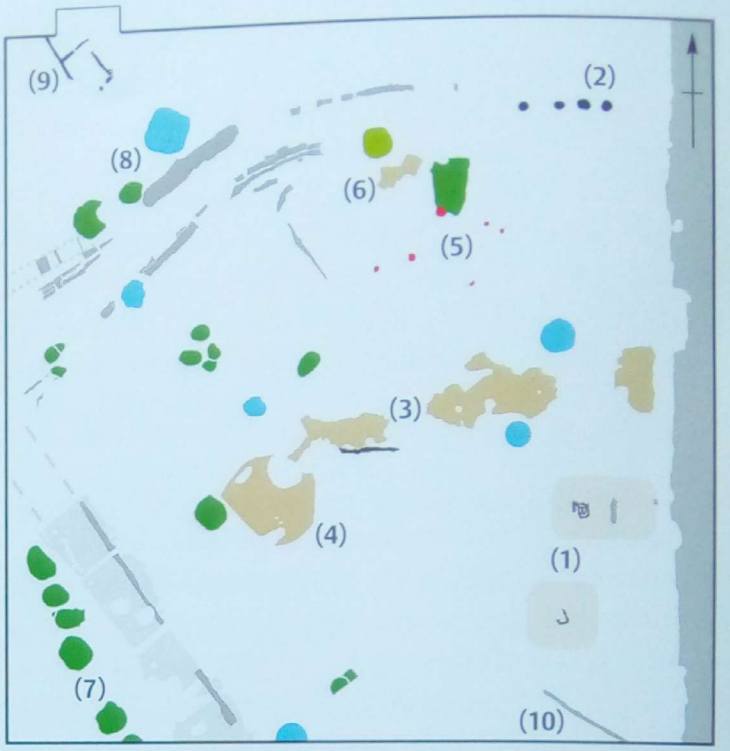
A phalera, a round stud-like harness fitting (A), would have been used on cavalry harness. Find B is a harness pendant shaped like a crescent moon. Pendants like this were used by both cavalry and civilians as good-luck charms to protect horses, riders and drivers from accidents. Smaller versions, often in gold or silver, were also worn as jewellery by young women.

Scanned by CamScanner

Period 1: The Client Kingdom

Both the emerging indications of a Roman military occupation in the 40s and the question of the fate of the civilian population present major challenges for the interpretation of the occupation of Calleva through the 40s and 50s. Within our trench the plan of occupation is beginning to clarify, revealing a tension between the Roman influence on alignments of the north-south street and the late Iron Age arrangements of thoroughfares and boundaries to the west.

Excavation to reveal the floor and hearth of a building in the south-east quadrant of the trench in 2010 (top). The brightly coloured clay floors of a building preserved by slumping into a pit (below).



Period 1 trench plan

The Roman Influence

In the south-east of the trench, beneath the Period 2 Early Roman Timber Buildings adjacent to the north-south street two rectangular, clay-floored structures are being revealed, each with a hearth constructed of re-used tiles, and, in contrast to the overlying buildings, each aligned with the street (1). Ash and charcoal covered the floors of both structures. West of the hearth of the northern building were the remains of broken pottery, particularly of large jar(s) of Silchester ware.

In the north-east corner of the trench post-holes representing more than one phase of construction include a row at right angles to the north-south street and flank the line of the later east-west street (2).

Set back from the north-south street and occupying ground towards the centre of the excavated area (and the Iron Age compound) is a discontinuous spread of yellow clay (3). This is interpreted as the floor of at least one, possibly two, rectangular timber buildings, with an orientation which is close to east-west. The structural components of this building or buildings are not yet clear, but there is one shallow, east-west slot which appears to limit the south edge of the

Scanned by CamScanner

western spread of clay. From a context overlying this floor was recovered the bronze brazier foot in the form of the Egyptian deity Harpocrates (right).

Iron Age continuities

Adjacent to the west end of the clay spreads described above is a round house defined by its clay floor (4) with clear traces of extensive burning across the floor as well as a central hearth. Quantities of broken pottery, mostly of large jar(s) of Silchester ware, were recovered from the surface of the floor.

Immediately adjacent to the round house was a circular pit filled with large quantities of material, particularly pottery and animal bone and a thick lens of charcoal. A further well lay a few metres to the north, close to two further rubbish pits, also characterised by deposits of charcoal and assemblages of material dominated by pottery and animal bone. Finally, to the north-east, is a cluster of small, shallow pits (5) which contained the burnt and unburnt remains of caprines, including a partial skeleton. We have provisionally interpreted these as the remains of sacrifices, probably of sheep.

Further pitting in the northern area reveals traces of what appear to be floor layers of yellow clay of a building slumped into the fills of the pit (6). Beyond the limits of the pit the floor has been truncated by later activity.

The two late Iron Age 'lanes' and their associated boundary features, including the prominent rows of large pits beyond them, continued in use through this period. The arrangement of large pits flanking the street in the south-west corner of the excavation trench (7) is matched by comparable evidence from the north-west (8). One implication arising from the arrangements appearing in the south-west corner is that the large pits lie beyond the successive barriers and may therefore be associated with a further compound to the south-west. The line of large pits in the north-west corner of the excavation trench can probably be regarded in the same light.

Remains of a rectangular timber building adjacent to the east-west street sealed and slumped into the fills of a late Iron Age well (9). This had been destroyed by fire. To the south-east the partially excavated remains of a further timber building appears to have suffered a similar fate (10).

Harpocrates vessel foot

This vessel foot was found during our 2009 excavation season in a levelling layer which overlay a Period 1 clay floor in the west of the trench. It is a rare find, coming from a circular vessel, probably a drink or food-warmer, made in the early first century in Campania in Italy. It is also unusual as a representation of Harpocrates in Britain - there are only eight figurines of the god and a staff or furniture terminal showing his head.

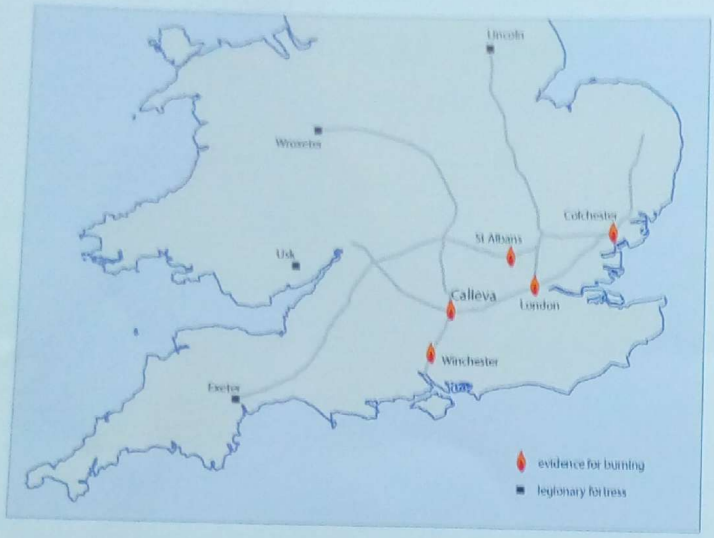
Standing at only 7.8cm tall, the base of the foot is a well-formed lion or panther's paw. It is topped by a calyx, from which rises the upper body of the god. He is shown here with wings, which associates him with Cupid. The wings are set at right angles to each other, and would have been riveted to the body of the vessel.

Harpocrates is the Egyptian Horus, son of Isis and Osiris, as a child. Because he was often shown raising his finger to lips, the Greeks and Romans took him as their god of secrecy and silence. He is shown on the Silchester vessel foot with a chubby face and thick shoulder-length hair with an odd feature on top of his head, rather like an elaborate top-knot. He holds a bird, probably a goose, tucked beneath his left arm, its head turned into the crook of his elbow. His right arm is folded over his chest, holding the end of his 'sidelock of youth', a plait worn by pre-pubescent Egyptian boys, though they were generally otherwise shaven-headed.

Scanned by CamScanner

Boudican destruction?

In order to account for the destruction which ends the Period 1 occupation we have previously suggested that Calleva was burnt down during the Boudican revolt. Before considering the case for a Boudican date, we need first to consider the evidence of the burning itself at Calleva.



Map of southern Britain showing Roman towns with evidence of burning dating to around the time of the Boudican uprising (top). Photograph of the burnt layer underneath the road in the north-east corner of the trench (below).

Evidence

There are, indeed, indications across the excavation trench of burning, but unlike the burnt horizons in Colchester, London and Verulamium (St. Albans), the Silchester horizon is not as substantial. There is no distinct, trench-wide layer, instead significant accumulations of burnt material were preserved beneath the east-west street as well as in pits filled with Claudio-Neronian pottery and other debris. All our Period 1 structures also show signs of burning on the floors.

Why should the Silchester burning appear so different from that evident in the other three towns? One explanation is that it reflects a less substantial timber architecture than that evident elsewhere. None of our structures has produced remains of robust post settings or of wooden posts set in deep foundation trenches as is the case with buildings in Colchester, London and Verulamium. Indeed there is a marked contrast between the construction of the (arguably) military timber building beneath the forum basilica, which does have these characteristics, and the flimsier structures revealed in Insula IX.

Burning is not confined to Insula IX; the mid-1st century AD timber building on the site of the later basilica was also destroyed around this time. Thus, in the two areas which have seen modern excavation within Calleva, both have evidence of burning around the middle of the 1st century AD.

Dating

How closely can we date the burning? The best source of evidence would be that provided by Roman coins whose date of minting can often be attributed to a single year. However, Nero did not issue bronze coinage until relatively late in his reign, so the latest datable copper coinage circulating at the time of the Boudican revolt was that of Claudius supplemented by a high volume of irregular copying very difficult to date in its own right. Coins, therefore, are no help to us. We are left then with the potential of other finds, such as pottery and South Gaulish samian in particular, where chronologies have been established for potters and decorative schemes within a range of two or three decades, often broadly associated with emperors' reigns, e.g. Claudian, Claudio-Neronian, pre-Flavian. This material, like the coins, does not help us narrow down the date of the burning.

Scanned by CamScanner

How do we then ascribe burnt horizons in Colchester, London and Verulamium to the Boudican revolt, if they cannot be closely dated? The answer is that an assumption has been made to link the destruction with the reports by the historians Dio Cassius and Tacitus that these three towns were destroyed by Boudica's forces. So then the question, why is Calleva not mentioned by the historians? One explanation might be that Calleva was still an oppidum in Roman eyes, not a chartered Roman town like Colchester and Verulamium, inhabited by Roman citizens, or thronged with Roman merchants as was the case with London. Its destruction was of little consequence to the Roman readership and so could easily have been overlooked by the historians.

The linking of archaeologically defined events with those recorded by Roman historians is fraught with difficulty. In the case of Calleva we cannot be certain of the cause of the destruction (it may well have been accidental) or of its precise date, but it is certainly of the time of the Boudican revolt. And the impact of the fire was similar to that experienced in the three named towns. As with Colchester, London and Verulamium there appears to be a gap of 20-25 years or so between destruction and rebuilding in Silchester Insula IX. We are currently dating the start of our Period 2 to the AD 80s.

Image courtesy of Museum of London

Donkey Mill

During 2009 three large fragments of German lava-stone were recovered within the fills of two postholes in our Early Roman levels. Two pieces had clearly been worked as they displayed well defined inside and outside surfaces. This suggested that they did not form part of the more widely used mill form - the quern-stone - and instead were part of a less common form known as a donkey- or hourglass-mill. These objects are very rare in Britain, but are well-known from settlements in Italy, such as Pompeii, and elsewhere on the Mediterranean rim, where they were used in commercial bakeries for milling grain. These mills consist of an upper hopper for the grain to be milled attached to a conical millstone below that is rotated over a fixed lower stone of conical shape (see reconstruction above). Power is supplied by animals or slaves. Microscopic and chemical analysis shows that the mill was made from a nepheline tephrite lava of a type well-known from the Eifel region of Germany, most often seen in the earlier Roman period in Britain in the form of hand-mills.

Silchester Insula IX: the next five years

As we approach the 15th season there are four big questions still to address:

- The character of the pre-Roman town
- The conquest-period Roman military occupation
- The town of the client king of the AD 40s and 50s
- The character of the possible Boudican destruction

Participants re-enact the event during an Open Day in 2006 (left).

Juxtaposition of the old and new: the Period 1 lane on the Iron Age 'diagonal' alignment and the east-west aligned post holes. Looking east to the north-east corner of the trench (back cover).

Scanned by CamScanner